

Trips: Trail Mix

Your region's go-now guide

Pinnipeds are fin-equipped mammals like walrus, seals, and sea lions. You can see four species at Point Bennett on San Miguel Island (see below):

California sea lion

Elephant seal

Northern fur seal

Harbor seal

3 Perfect Days

Flagstaff, AZ **West Fork Oak Creek Canyon**
Arrive by 8 a.m. to hike this popular trail while it's still cool and crowd-free. Travel six miles out-and-back through a forested canyon with towering, sculpted sandstone walls. Then up the adrenaline on the ropes course at the new Flagstaff Extreme adventure center 20 minutes away (\$42; reservations recommended; flagstaffextreme.com). **Trip ID*** 1090796

Helena, MT **Helena Ridge Trail**
Catch the free trolley from the pedestrian mall to the Park City trailhead (it runs twice every weekend morning through September 30), then hike 8.7 miles along a ridge with views of distant peaks and town below. Your route ends just a block from the Blackfoot River Brewing Company (blackfootriverbrewing.com); enjoy a pint of Scottish Ale before heading home. **Trip ID** 782922

Las Vegas, NV **Grand Circle Loop**
Take advantage of cooler fall temps to explore Red Rock NCA's cliffs and hoodoos on an 11.7-mile loop. Pack a blanket and a picnic, so you can head 10 miles down the road to watch theater under the stars in Spring Mountain Ranch SP (supersummertheatre.org). **Trip ID** 5702

9/29

National Public Lands Day Get free admission to federal lands and volunteer in parks. **Spotlight: Moab, UT** Remove weeds in Westwater Canyon. Find an event near you: publiclandsday.org.



Secrets of the Rangers

Point Bennett, San Miguel Island, Channel Islands NP

According to Chief of Interpretation **Yvonne Menard**, a 25-year veteran of this craggy chain of islands off the coast of Santa Barbara, this 14-mile out-and-back to a world-class wildlife mecca is one of the best adventures in the park. Yet few people do it. "We get around 300,000 yearly visitors," she says, "and less than one percent visit San Miguel." September is the perfect time to go: Sea conditions are calmest, and the coastal fog has usually

gone away. First, take a 3.5-hour ferry ride to the park's westernmost isle. There's no dock, so expect a wet landing and store your gear in dry bags. Bring all your own water and plan to stay at least two nights in the primitive campground (the boat only comes every few days). On day one, spend the afternoon snorkeling in Cuyler Harbor (pack a mask). The next day, take the ranger-guided hike to count four species of pinnipeds (see above) on the windswept beach at Point Bennett. "Every beach on the island has seals and sea lions, but Point Bennett's rookery is unparalleled," Menard says. "Expect to see 100,000 seals and sea lions." Along the way, stop at Caliche Forest to see the gritty sand remnants of ancient trees. Day three, look for evidence of Chumash settlements (piles of abalone shells and sea urchin skeletons) on the east side of the beach at Cuyler Harbor before you return to the mainland. **Contact** (805) 658-5730; nps.gov/chis **Permit** \$15 per campsite **Ferry** Island Packers, (805) 642-1393; islandpackers.com

Explore:

Denver-area Trails

Mt. Audubon, Indian Peaks Wilderness

➔ Score summit views of Longs Peak and the Gore Range from this relatively mel-low 7.6-mile out-and-back to a 13,223-foot summit (no scrambling required). In September, enjoy smaller crowds and the beginnings of fall colors, while getting above treeline before snows hit (**Trip ID** 53181). Download our free smartphone app, GPS Trails, to check out dozens more Denver-area dayhikes: backpacker.com/gpstrails.

Bragging Rights

Test your trekking toughness in an epic new canyon country race.

Every hiker should visit Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park and Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. But if you really want to raise the bar, see them both—and everything in between—on one grueling weeklong trek. The inaugural Grand 2 Grand Ultra (g2gultra.com) stage race, September 23-29 this year, covers 160 miles in seven days, connecting the two parks and crossing some of the region's most remote and remarkable canyon terrain. Support crews provide water en route, but participants still need to carry their own gear and food. Follow BACKPACKER staffers and first-time ultra-distance competitors Andrew Bydlon, Shannon Davis, and Dennis Lewon as they join the race at backpacker.com/g2g.



Solitude Finder

Hoover Lake Loop, **Henry Coe SP, CA**

With annual visitation of fewer than 40,000, Northern California's largest state park (87,000 rugged acres) offers loads of privacy—particularly in its steep back-country. Hike nine miles into the park to earn ridgetop views of wooded slopes and a serene campsite above a small back-country reservoir. First, avoid company on lesser-used but lush Madrone Soda Springs and Mile Trails to reach the relatively popular swimming holes along Coyote Creek's East Fork. Then, at mile 5.6, start the calf-burning climb up narrow Willow Ridge Trail—1,200 feet over 1.6 miles, with more false summits than switchbacks—to earn your privacy. Of the four lakes accessible from Willow Ridge, one-acre Hoover, off an easy, unmarked trail, is least-visited—unless you count the lark sparrows, goldfinches, and other songbirds that flutter among its blue oaks and gray pines. In September, the evergreens offer a shaded respite from the waning summer heat. **Trip ID** 1714094

*Get free GPS data and print custom maps by adding the Trip ID to BACKPACKER.COM/HIKES/.

State Park Savior Many California parks are closed due to budget woes; Coe remains open thanks to private donations.